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# Internal vs. External Voucher Plans for Educational Reform: Public Schools of Choice

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**Mario Fantini**

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**O**f all the major educational reform proposals advanced in the past decades, education vouchers must be rated as highly significant and very popular with the public (a recent Gallup Poll revealed that 60% of the sample favors some type of education voucher). Following closely on the heels of a series of reform failures, and with reformers now faced with a depleting stockpile of implementable ideas needed to tackle the now well-established crises in American education, the voucher plan offers a fresh approach to the problem.

In the face of a tightening economy, citizens have called for a new fiscal accountability. In the area of education, many are asking whether there has really

been a payoff from the financial investments of the 60's. Reports from the field on programs such as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 are far from promising. Added to this new mood of public accountability is the growing awareness that compensatory-type approaches to school improvement really result in more money being spent in the same old ways, which have been increasingly subjected to criticism by growing numbers of students and parents, the educational consumers themselves.

The voucher approach to educational reform differs significantly from the other, often less popular plans, attempted during the 1960's (desegregation, decentralization, and community control), each of which collapsed under the weight of both lay and professional resistance. Briefly, the voucher idea attempts to both increase the educational purchasing power of the poor and create a new type of educational purchasing power by issuing to parents a "voucher" (certificate) worth a given amount of money to be used as full or partial tuition payment at a school—private or public—of choice.<sup>1</sup>

Of immediate interest to the poor, the voucher also has appeal for other groups—especially parochial school advocates. The idea of vouchers is embraced by the Office of Economic Opportunity in Washington as a vehicle for improving the education of the poor. An OEO pamphlet on vouchers, issued in January 1971, states: "It is readily apparent that the education system is failing the poor—both by failing to provide adequate skills and by failing to retain children in school.

"One reason for this disparity could well be that poor parents have little opportunity to affect the type or quality of education received by their children. The poor have no means by which to make the education system more responsive to their needs and desires. More affluent parents usually can obtain a good education for their children because they *can* choose schools for their children to attend—either by deciding where to live or by sending the children to private schools. Poverty and residential segregation deny this choice to low-income and minority parents.

"The Office of Economic Opportunity therefore has begun to seek a means to introduce greater accountability and parental control into schools in such a way that the poor would have a wider range of choices, and that the schools would remain attractive to the more affluent. This has led to consideration of an experiment in which public education money would be given directly to parents in the form of vouchers, or certificates, which the parents could then take to the school of their choice, public or nonpublic, as payment for their children's education."

Education vouchers have added important and political concepts to the reform effort. By placing a "new" type of purchasing power into the hands of the consumer, the plan approaches the delivery of education services in terms of supply and demand. Parents are viewed as consumers with the right to demand quality services and to be provided with the opportunity to gain access to those services.

Politically, the idea of vouchers focuses on the rights of citizens to quality education, including the right to

exercise choice. Traditionally, educational decision-making has filtered downward, originating from such obscure places as district offices, state departments, and even federal buildings. It is simply wrong in a large city that an educational decision made by one person, or a small group of persons far from the learning process itself should influence the educational concerns of millions of parents, students, teachers and administrators alike. Yet this is what often times happens. Meanwhile, these very parents, students, teachers, and administrators, who should be natural allies working together at the center of the decision-making process on a common goal, expend their energies indicting each other for their shortcomings in performing their roles in the educational process. When the smoke clears, we are still confronted with the need for a reformed public school system which can utilize constructively the direct, unified participation of parents, students, teachers, and administrators—those closest to the actual learning process.

**I**n principle the individual is the source of a democracy's existence and the basic unit of an open political system. In our highly complex society, however, most political decision-making is delegated to elected representatives. Although the voter can, theoretically, reclaim the right, direct participation is today often thought to be a thing of the past. The principle of majority rule, while appearing to be a fair means of facilitating political decision-making, unfortunately and necessarily neglects minority interests. This is especially true of decision-making in education today. Yet diverse viewpoints not hostile to democratic values *can* be expressed in an open society, without jeopardizing the nation. Until non-delegated choice by individual citizens is incorporated into the educational system, however, little can be done to convince those holding diverse viewpoints in a community that the school system is meeting the needs of that community.

The voucher proposals being advanced by OEO and other agencies include the public school among the alternatives from which a citizen may choose; in actuality, however, the plan is skewed in the direction of non-public school options. This is understandable, since to many reformers, the public school establishment represents an inflexible bureaucracy, incapable of serious change. They feel that to consider serious reform from within the public schools framework is an invitation to perilous compromise. The voucher has most appeal to those who want to "escape" from the public schools.

The voucher concept can be viewed as having either an *external* or *internal* emphasis. The externally oriented voucher system emphasizes access to alternative schools *outside* public school systems. The internally oriented voucher plan views access to alternatives existing within the framework of public school systems. Both plans rely on increased consumer interest in alternative forms of education and in their right of choice. It is our intent to

make the case for an *internal voucher system*, which we call Public Schools of Choice.

A voucher system of education which operates in a manner *external* to the public school system is less necessary or desirable than an *internal* one. We hasten to underscore, however, that we are not denying the values of a voucher-oriented system, but are rather suggesting that the public schools have the capacity and the resources to have such a system operate *internally*. Indeed, the true merit of the current interest in educational vouchers is that it has provided a new way of looking at the problem of delivering quality education to dissatisfied consumers, who are increasingly interested in alternative forms of education and in their right of choice. This "new way" has stimulated the public schools to start developing educational alternatives themselves. In other words, the external voucher has influenced development of the internal voucher plan, which, rather than creating another bureaucratic regulatory agency apart from the public schools would give, through the voucher emphasis on alternatives, a new mission to the public school mechanism.

To many, it may seem ironic that we advance a plan of reform from within the framework of public schools when it is the public schools themselves that have been so fiercely criticized in recent years as entrenched bureaucracies, impervious to change. Why should an internal voucher plan escape the fate of earlier reform proposals? This line of inquiry is particularly fundamental to our case for an internal voucher rationale and therefore deserves elaboration.

First, we need to underscore the effect that the current, growing mood of public accountability is having on public schools. Dissatisfied educational consumers are no longer a quiet minority; on the contrary, they have become, in certain quarters, a "critical mass" of concerned citizens with specific demands. For example, in New York City, consumer demand reached a stage at which the governance structure of the city school system was dramatically altered through decentralization. Under decentralization a community-based decision-making layer was established, which cut across a highly centralized, professionally-dominated bureaucracy.

This new climate of no-nonsense accountability has begun to develop a new awareness in professional educators inside the public schools. This awareness *can* lead to a new responsiveness—especially if any proposals for reform are viewed as "constructive," that is as plans in which they, the professionals, can participate and which do not "say" to them "everything you are doing or have done is wrong, and you are the enemy."

Secondly, there are many teachers, supervisors and administrators who feel constrained by the "system" of public schooling and are eager to unite with parents and students in a search for reform. These professional educators have been waiting for a new framework for action. In fact, at various times many have attempted successfully to bring about changes, against major obstacles.

Thirdly, the institutional orientation for most of the educators who work inside our public school system has been one of trying to improve the *current* structure, the *current* education process. That is to say, the so-called educational establishment has directed its tremendous energy and talent at trying to make the standard educational approach (age-graded organization, self-control classes, coverage of classical content, etc.) work for every child. The problem now is that we are in an age of universal education. Diversity, cultural and stylistic, has overloaded the standard process. Professional attempts to get the learner to adjust to the school and its process has produced a system of human classification which is now dysfunctional in relation to the very aims of education. We have, for example, labeled learners as "slow" or "deprived" or "disadvantaged". We are now recognizing that a way of classifying people is a way of thinking about them, and inevitably generates a psychology of expectations with self-fulfilling tendencies.

Enough members of the public school establishment have embraced the new philosophy—that the problem is not with the learner but with the institution and that it is the responsibility of public schools to adjust to the learner, rather than the other way around—to sustain an internal effort to formulate new groundrules for professional action. This considerable professional energy internal to the system could be channelled from attempts to improve one educational process to attempts to create alternative forms of education within the basic framework of public schools.

Fourthly, a major concern in the development of public schools has been to insure that they would be non-sectarian, non-exclusive, that they would reflect the basic values of an open, free society. Public schools are mature enough, strong enough to withstand any pressure that would make the school and its educational process agents for special interests inimical to the values of a free society. The public schools—open to public accountability as they are—are more capable of representing our noblest values than some of our more exclusive private schools. The danger exists that a quick rise in private sector education—without very tight supervision and monitoring—could, in the name of responsiveness, create educational structures which would not serve the basic societal values that support a free society.

Further, as we shall emphasize again later, alternative forms of education, to be legitimized under a framework of public schools, must satisfy other important standards. One criterion in particular deserves mention here. Any alternative mode of education must be capable of addressing a *comprehensive set of educational objectives*, not just particular objectives. For example, some may advance a "free school" option based on the theory that it is complete freedom of the learner that is important—and that happiness and joy are the major objectives of education. This alternative should not be legitimized by public schools because of its emphasis on

particular objectives at the expense of others. Public schools have a responsibility for such a wide range of objectives as:

1. Basic learning to learn skills—reading, writing communications, inquiring, analyzing.
2. Talent development—developing individual creative potentialities.
3. Preparation for basic success in assuming major societal careers: parent, consumer, citizen, self-developing individual.

These can be broadly cast in “cognitive” (intellectual) and “affective” (emotional) terms. And, it is possible for certain alternative forms of education to cultivate people who are happy and joyous, but who cannot read or write or qualify for any realistic economic career. In the name of humanistic education, certain educational options may be proposed which emphasize primarily affective objectives. The learner who has selected these options may realize too late that there are other requirements for full involvement in the multi-environments (economic, political, cultural, social) of modern society. Ironically in these cases, the very broad humanistic objectives sought may, in the end, produce exactly the opposite effects, by denying the learner options in the real world.

Public schools are instrumentally related to the fabric of society—economically, politically, and culturally—and it is difficult, if not impossible, for public schools to ignore or dismiss these ties. Public schools are also manpower institutions, and they appear to be in a better position to protect the next generation from educational experiences which would leave them with no real-world skills than do the less accountable private sectors.

Fifth, if our assumption is valid that the present public school educational process constitutes only one alternative to a common set of objectives and that a diverse consumer-society is rightfully demanding alternatives to that one—then the real task is the delivery of an expanded *supply* of legitimate educational alternatives. In supply and demand terms, we now have a high demand market, but limited supply. The *external* voucher is a demand-side mechanism which is expected to affect the supply side. We have some experience with other demand-side techniques in other fields. For example, the new consumer resources made available via Medicaid and the G.I. Bill did relatively little to increase the actual supply of health or educational manpower of facilities. What did happen, it appears, is that the *existing* alternatives were made more available to the consumer.

Under an external voucher plan for education existing private schools would be sure to benefit. However, new private schools would probably spring up. But how could any educational consumer be certain of their quality? What is to prevent a “fly-by-night” pattern from emerging during high demand-low supply periods? The problem is one of the legitimization of educational alternatives. The *public* schools have the manpower, the

mechanisms, and the knowledge to deliver such a new supply system of safeguarded options.

Sixth, for any voucher plan to succeed, enormous attention needs to be given to parent and citizen education. Unless parents and families have basic educational information and understandings, their ability to make the kinds of choices that will benefit children will be seriously curtailed. The heart of any voucher approach is individual choice from among educational alternatives. This means that parents and students in particular need to be “educated” in the theory and practice underlying each educational alternative. This type of consumer education cannot be left to chance. A program needs to be developed which can reach most parents and students. Again, it appears that the public schools are in a better position to do this.

Public schools can reach almost all learners and their parents quickly, through the built-in mechanisms of student assemblies, parent meetings, and other similar devices. They also have the manpower, the hardware, and software to educate the consumer. The task of using these resources for these new purposes is one which the public schools ought to consider, in the light of the possible adverse consequences posed by an external voucher plan.

Finally, there are crucial political considerations. No change escapes politics. The external voucher has posed a great threat to the professional educator. The voucher is viewed as a plan to by-pass the public schools. Naturally professional educators and their organizations have taken a stand in opposition to the external voucher plan. As a “power bloc” educators and their professional organizations—most importantly, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers—will lobby against external vouchers but probably not against internal vouchers.

Further, the majority of Americans still attend and support a system of public schools. They may early perceive the introduction of external vouchers as an attempt to weaken the public schools and strengthen private schools, including the controversial parochial schools. These citizens are not likely to sit by and watch an external voucher plan take serious hold. These citizens, too, are likely to prefer an internal voucher plan to an external one.

For financial reasons alone, the parallel-school approach is hardly likely to become widespread in the foreseeable future. The establishment of private schools sufficient to handle significant numbers of poor children would require public support and, in effect, establish a private system of publicly supported schools. Middle-income parents might well demand similar privileges.

These arguments are, of course, no reason to discourage programs that enable more low-income pupils to attend private schools within the framework of their existing relationship to the public schools. Private

schools could serve a valuable yardstick function if they were run under conditions that simulated the resources and inputs of public education—using comparable per-capita expenditures, and admission policies that would embrace a range of low-income pupils, including those labeled as “disruptive.” But that is the limit of their usefulness as an alternative method to improve public education, for the dangers inherent in an external voucher system, even a system as heavily regulated as the proposed OEO external voucher experiment, should lead us to find ways to reap the benefits of a voucher approach without sacrificing democratic ideals.

**T**he time is ripe for an internal voucher system, which we call Public Schools of Choice. A reconceptualization of functions and a reorganization of resources is needed for any true reformation of the public schools. Adherence to the following set of groundrules would be requisite if actual reform is to take place. Any internal system of choice should:

1. demonstrate adherence to a **COMPREHENSIVE SET OF EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES**—not particular ones. Proposals cannot, for example, emphasize only emotional growth at the expense of intellectual development. Comprehensive educational objectives deal with work careers, citizenship, talent development, intellectual and emotional growth, problem solving, critical thinking, and the like.

2. **not SUBSTANTIALLY INCREASE THE PER STUDENT EXPENDITURE** from that of established programs. To advance an idea which doubles or triples the budget will at best place the proposal in the ideal-but-not practical category. The new approach will deal with wiser use of OLD money, not the quest for additional money.

3. **not ADVOCATE ANY FORM OF EXCLUSIVITY**—racial, religious, or economic. Solutions cannot deny equal access to any particular individuals or groups.

4. **not be SUPER-IMPOSED.** The days of a small group planning **FOR** or doing things **TO** others are rapidly fading.

5. **respect the RIGHTS OF ALL CONCERNED PARTIES AND DISTRIBUTE BENEFITS JUSTLY TO EVERYONE**—they cannot appear to serve the interests of one group only. Thus, for instance, if decentralization plans of urban school systems are interpreted to serve only minority communities, then the majority community may very well oppose such efforts.

Similarly, if plans appear to favor professionals, then the community may be in opposition.

6. **not claim a SINGLE, ACROSS-THE-BOARD ANSWER.** Attempts at uniform solutions lack the necessary flexibility to be successful under varying conditions.

7. **advocate a PROCESS OF CHANGE WHICH IS DEMOCRATIC AND MAXIMIZES INDIVIDUAL DECISION-MAKING.** Participation by the individual in the decisions which affect his life is basic to comprehensive citizen support.

These groundrules are the criteria which, in our opinion, must be considered for any realistic reform proposal, whether in a district-wide or a city-wide plan. In the light of these criteria for success, we can see why such proposals as decentralization and community control were difficult to implement. We submit that our proposal for Public Schools of Choice does adhere to these criteria.

Under the Public Schools of Choice system, each parent, student, and teacher will have an opportunity to participate directly in educational decisions affecting him. Each of these parties will be able to select the educational alternative which suits him best. Majority-rule decisions will be replaced by choices made by each and every individual.

However, before a Public Schools of Choice model can be implemented in any school or school district, it is imperative that each participant fully understand the options being offered. Responsibility for this initial step lies with the school administrator. Informing parents, students, and teachers of the various options may be accomplished through the media available to him as principal, including organizations such as the PTA, and through other community groups. Having a participatory body capable of making informed decisions is as crucial as having options from which to choose.

Many teachers, together with parents and students, will develop alternative options. An internal voucher plan provides opportunities for each teacher to employ that alternative which best matches his teaching style. Teachers who feel most comfortable with the current educational approach will not be threatened, since the standard option is one of the basic alternatives.

At present, teachers have their own “teaching styles,” which in turn generate certain types of classroom structure and environment. For example, the teacher may be the dominant force in the social system of the classroom, or he may establish a certain type of control system with his students. He may be “content” centered, in that he systematically covers a given body of prescribed subject matter. Another teacher’s style might generate a setting in which he is in the background, with students assuming major responsibilities for learning. He may emphasize direct experiences as the vehicle for problem-solving. He may approach the mastering of subject matter by having students apply their content to real life problems.

There are many more variations in teaching style. Yet the present practice is for teachers to impose their own style on any group of students, whether or not the

are exposed to different teaching styles—*not by choice but by chance*. Some students are capable of responding to the particular teaching style, others are not.

A more “tailored”, individualized approach is possible within an internal voucher framework. Since each teacher is free to select the educational alternative which best fits his style, and since students choose the alternative that best suits their individual styles of learning, a new match is achieved—no longer so much by chance as by choice.

Public Schools of Choice is not dependent on additional money, for it makes use of existing personnel, and only calls for a rearrangement of existing resources. Many of these resources now being utilized to improve a unitary student educational process can be directed to the development of alternatives. Planning time for the participants to engage in the development of options is, of course, critical. But current budgets carry in-service training, public relations, and consultant items, for example, all of which can be redirected toward the realization of an internal voucher system. Federal monies used for Title I and III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act can also be converted in the same way.<sup>2</sup>

Public Schools of Choice may exist at an initial stage within a single school. In fact, this may be the most effective approach at first. For example, in primary education a single school may offer as options: 1) a Montessori program, 2) a traditional kindergarten program, 3) a Bereiter-Englemann program, and 4) a British Infant School model.

The options for primary and secondary schools which may be developed by a school or school district might include the following:

*Option #1—Traditional:* The school is graded and emphasizes the acquisition of basic skills, i.e. reading, writing, mathematics, by cognitive methods. The basic learning unit is the classroom, manned by one or more teachers who direct and instruct students in their tasks. Students are encouraged to adapt to the style of the school. Youngsters with diagnosed learning handicaps participate in remedial programs. The educational and fiscal policy of this school is determined entirely by the Central Board of Education.

*Option #2—Open and Non-graded:* This school resembles the primary schools and Leicestershire Infant Schools of Britain. The “School” is divided into learning “areas”, each containing many constructional and manipulative materials. Youngsters work individually or in small groups on various specialized learning projects, with the teachers acting as facilitators, rather than managers. Many activities occur outside the school building.

*Option #3—Vocation-oriented:* This school fosters learning by experience. The school is responsible for identifying individual talents and prescribing suitable experiences for their nourishment. Various learning and teaching styles are operational here, and concrete performance is deemed as important as theoretical proficiency. This program is geared toward the work world.

*Option #4—Automated:* The programs at this school utilize technological devices. Computers are used for diagnosis of the students’ needs and abilities, and subsequent instruction. The library contains banks of tape recordings and “talking”, “listening”, and manipulative carrels which can be student-operated. Closed-circuit television is offered in this school, as well as retrieval systems for student-teacher conferences on individual learning problems.

*Option #5—Total Community School:* This school operates on a 12–14 hour basis for at least six days a week all year. Adults and children participate in educational and civic programs. The facility provides services for health, legal aid, and employment. Para-professionals or community teachers assist in every phase of the regular school program, and the school is controlled by a board of community representatives. This board hires the two chief administrators, one of whom directs all other activities in the school. More than a school, this institution is a community center.

*Option #6—Montessori:* Students move at their own pace and are largely self-directed. The learning areas are rich with creative selection. The teacher functions within a specifically defined methodology, but he is a guide, not a director. The development of sensory perception is emphasized in Montessori classrooms.

*Option #7—Multi-Culture School:* Named for the model in San Francisco, this school is defined by its ethnic heterogeneity. As many as five ethnic groups may be equally represented, and part of each day separates these groups for homogeneous learning. These classes are concerned with the language, customs, history, and heritage of the respective group. Several times per week one group shares an aspect of its culture with the other students. Diversity is the outstanding value here, and its curriculum is humanistic in content. Questions of group identity, inter-group identity, power, and individual identity are discussed at School #7. The school is governed by a policy board comprised of equal numbers of parents and teachers, which is only tangentially responsible to the Central Board of Education.

*Option #8—Performance Contract School:* Educational consumers may want to sub-contract with an educational firm to operate one of their public schools. In Gary, Indiana, Behavioral Research Laboratories is operating the Banneker Elementary School under a contract with

the public schools. The contract contains a money-back guarantee that the children in the school will achieve a certain set of educational objectives, i.e., reading at grade level. The Banneker program makes wide use of individualized reading materials developed by the company.

Of course, these are but a few of the large number of options which may be used.

While educational alternatives are being developed in various public school districts in this country (for example, New York City; Philadelphia; Newton, Mass.; Great Neck, N.Y.), the Berkeley Unified School District in California appears at present to be at the most advanced stage of operation and offers convincing proof that an internal system of choice is a realistic as well as a desirable possibility.

Over the past several years the Berkeley Unified School District has become organized around a system of developed and developing alternate schools. The options in operation represent over twenty separate and distinctive experimental schools which can be grouped under four categories:<sup>3</sup>

1. *Multi-culture Schools*—These schools have children carefully selected on the basis of diversity—racial, socio-economic, age and sex. During part of the school day the students meet and work together. At other times they meet in their own ethnic, social, or educational groups learning their own culture, language, customs, history and heritage or other special curriculum; later these aspects are shared with the wider group. Pupils learn from the strengths and weaknesses of each group. In a deliberate and planned way they learn to appreciate differences but at the same time to break down polarization. They may well form a model of what all Berkeley may be like in the future. These schools operate at the Kindergarten to grade 6 (K-6) level.

2. *Community schools*—The organization, curriculum and the teaching approach of these schools comes from outside of the classroom—from the community. There is use made of courts, markets, museums, parks, theatres, and other educational resources in the community. The schools are multi-aged and ungraded with an emphasis on real-life problem-solving. Emphasis is on learning together rather than solitary competition, on developing a multi-cultural community of participating families that learn from each other, and for the older children, of working directly in the community in agencies, business or projects. These schools operate at the K-12 level.

3. *Structured Skills-Training Schools*—These schools are graded and emphasize the learning of basic skills—reading, writing and math. Learning takes place primarily in the classroom and is directed by either one teacher or a team of teachers. These schools operate at the K-12 level.

4. *Schools-without-walls*—The focus of these schools is the child and his development. The staff deals with the child rather than the subject. The schools are ungraded and typically their style and arrangements are unstructured. Their goals are to have the students grow in self-understanding and self-esteem, learn how to cope with social and intellectual frustration and master the basic and social skills through their own interests.

The children are encouraged to assume responsibility for their learning and growth. The teacher's role is one of facilitating the child's learning and supporting his growth. These schools operate at the K-12 level.

The virtue of our proposal is its facilitation of informed decisions on the part of parents, students, and teachers. The more options available, the greater will be the importance of educational choice in giving the educational system a new resiliency and responsiveness.

Reconnecting the public schools directly with those who use them and with society is the necessary task for educational reform in the 70's. The Public Schools of Choice system is a response to this felt need.

1. While the concept of voucher appears new in this country, it is well-established in some European countries. For example, the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark have voucher systems in operation in which parents decide between public and private schools.

2. In some cases, alternatives can actually save money. For example, it is estimated that "The School Without Walls" (the Parkway Program in Philadelphia), by using the city as the school, actually saved the city 15 million dollars in construction costs.

3. The descriptions are drawn from *Alternate Schools: A Proposal Submitted to the United States Office of Educative Experimental Schools Program*. Berkeley Unified School District, April, 1971. The proposal stated that: "the Alternative Schools will constitute a system of educational options giving parents, students, teachers and administrators a direct voice in educational structure that will be a radical departure from local school systems as they are currently operated throughout the country."